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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000005

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/06/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR LY SL

SUBJECT: SOUNDS OF SILENCE: QADHAFI TALKS BUT SAYS LITTLE

REF: A. 2008 FREETOWN 604

B. 2008 FREETOWN 605

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Muammar Qadhafi's unexpected visit to Freetown ended on January 3, leaving little in his wake beyond confusion regarding his motivations. Accompanied by an entourage of 500, including a heavily armed security detachment, Qadhafi made no public promises of support for Sierra Leone beyond trumpeting anti-Western rhetoric and his own interest for an African Union Government. Though received by many with fanfare and enthusiasm, including the designation of "Honorary Member of Parliament" - an honor never before bestowed on a visiting Head of State - his failure to provide substantial gifts and support appears to be a considerable disappointment. Though Qadhafi's seemingly renewed interest in the sub-region since the Guinean coup may appear to be an opportunity to push an assistance agenda, President Koroma will likely wait until Libyan intentions are clearer. End Summary.

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WHY ASK WHY? EVEN QADHAFI DOESN'T SEEM TO KNOW THE ANSWER  
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¶2. (C) Qadhafi's trip to Sierra Leone, arranged with little notice to the host government (reflets), continues to be shrouded in mystery even after his departure. Few details were released regarding his activities in-country, and is likely rife with misinformation. A diplomatic dinner celebrating his arrival on January 31 was changed, unannounced, to a press conference and reception. Diplomats arriving for what they expected to be a formal dinner were surprised to find themselves in a standing-room only crowd at State House, surrounded by suspected pro-Qadhafi audience "plants" who exuberantly welcomed the Libyan leader upon his tardy arrival. To open the conference, President Koroma reminded the audience of his own visit to Libya a short time after his inauguration, and the many promises made then by Qadhafi to support Sierra Leone's development. He expressed his hope that Qadhafi's visit is an indication that those promises will soon be fulfilled.

¶3. (C) Qadhafi's subsequent speech failed to address Koroma's pointed request for assistance. His rambling response focused on the need for African unity, stating that this is the richest continent with the poorest people, and that greater unity would make Africa a stronger voting bloc against such powers as the U.S., EU, India, and China. His comment that "you don't need donors, donors need you" garnered considerable applause, and he enjoyed tremendous popularity with the crowd until the question and answer period. Obviously unprepared, Qadhafi fumbled most of the questions posed to him by journalists. Questioned about what he was bringing to assist Sierra Leone, he gave a vague and empty response; some members of the crowd were visibly disappointed. Asked what he has to show for his decade-long campaign for African unity, Qadhafi condemned the will of the

African people, which alienated the audience with his perceived condescension. His primary folly, however, was his failure to give an adequate answer to the question "What are you doing in Sierra Leone?". He responded that he would know the answer once the visit was over. Though it appeared that his motivation to visit was a mystery even to him, some in the crowd appeared to find the answer disingenuous.

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ALL I GOT WAS THIS STUPID T-SHIRT: DETRACTORS SPEAK OUT  
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¶4. (C) Despite a hard-working propaganda machine, ensuring that many of those living on the streets were gifted with Qadhafi t-shirts and posters, civil society were quick to counter with reminders of Qadhafi's reported involvement in the decade-long civil conflict. Many were outraged that Parliament made him an honorary Member on January 1, asking why such an honor would be given to a man with Sierra Leonean blood on his hands. Others framed Qadhafi's reception from the government as obsequious, scorning their willingness to host a surprise visit and then "beg" for assistance that had been promised nearly a year ago. Media reports about the visit on January 5 included a range of reactions, from glowing support for Qadhafi's visit to condemnation of his presence, views, and opaque motivations. Business leaders queried Ambassador (and likely other diplomats) about possible motives for Qadhafi's travel to Sierra Leone.

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COMMENT  
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¶5. (C) According to a State House source, Qadhafi departed Sierra Leone on January 3 to meet with coup leaders in Conakry. This contradicts previous information indicating that the purpose of his trip to Sierra Leone was to have a secure location for meetings with Captain Camara and his entourage. Though members of Qadhafi's advance team did camp near the Guinean border, Qadhafi reportedly did not join them there and had no meetings with members of the regime in Freetown. His visit yielded little fruit to compensate the Sierra Leonean government for the logistical nightmare they faced hosting a state visit with minimal notice, a constantly changing itinerary, and unclear mission. For a government desperate for an outside injection of funds and technical support, Koroma and his compatriots are no doubt disappointed that Qadhafi failed to respond favorably to requests or make good on old promises. Despite this, we expect the President will be careful to mask these feelings until Qadhafi's interests and intentions with regards to the Guinea situation are revealed. End Comment.

PERRY